"Dead Letters": Impersonality and the Mourning of World Literature in Ivan Vladislavić's *Double Negative*

Abstract. In his 2010 novel, *Double Negative*, South African author Ivan Vladislavić undertakes an ethico-political and literary project of impersonality. Impersonality is understood in four interrelated ways: as an ethos characterised by a paradoxically passionate indifference; as an operation of depersonalisation transforming individuated persons into eventalised singularities; as a poetics, employing such literary techniques as affectless prose or the deconstruction of realist regimes of character; and as an ontological indeterminacy, whereby something is simultaneously posited and subtracted or in which binaries are rendered indeterminate. These general features of impersonality become accentuated and frustrated under historical conditions of postcolonialism. In the case of *Double Negative*, impersonality falls prey to two dilemmas: the dilemma of postcolonial publicity and that of postcolonial mourning under conditions of rampant neoliberalism. The article explores the novel's (partial) solutions to these dilemmas and concludes by suggesting that world literature might itself be conceived as a work – and object – of mourning.

Keywords: Ivan Vladislavić, impersonality, person, world literature, mourning, fetish.

Introduction

On his return to Johannesburg in the early 1990s, Neville Lister, the autodiegetic narrator of Ivan Vladislavić's 2010 novel *Double Negative*, comes across a book of photographs of the city's inhabitants by Saul Auerbach, a renowned South African photographer:[1]

> Absence had sharpened my relationship to these strangers. Without making the heart grow fonder, it had thinned the skin of my eye until every one of them could seem representative. In the flesh, on the same street, I would have kept my distance; at this scale, at this remove, they drew close and felt familiar. All their names were on the tip of my tongue. I kept thinking: I know this person. I know this kind of person. (Vladislavić 2010, 112)[2]

The passage revolves around a basic paradox: it is only through absence and distance that Neville feels close to the subjects of the photographs. His relationship to these

[1] I am grateful to Stuart Taberner and the anonymous peer reviewer for helpful comments on previous versions of this article. All remaining errors are my own.
[2] *Double Negative* henceforth *DN*.

figures, many of them poor and black, is not one of warm-hearted compassion, but of a coolly refined gaze. The subjects seem simultaneously to be themselves and to stand for something else, such that they hover between empirical presence and symbolic mediation. Bodily immediacy ("[i]n the flesh") is not a guarantee of personal closeness; on the contrary, for Neville, corporeal presence paradoxically produces distance. It is in absence and distance itself that true closeness resides. The names of the figures are on the tip of his tongue, suggesting that they approach but do not fully attain the status of unique persons. The final line – "I know this person. I know this kind of person" – confirms the overall impression that these figures unsettle the common-sense distinction between the singularity of the person and the impersonal generality of the kind.

In what follows I shall argue that this indeterminacy is part of a larger ethico-political and literary project of impersonality undertaken by Vladislavić in *Double Negative*, one which (with important variations) is common to much contemporary world literature. Generally speaking, the project of impersonality consists of four elements. As an ethos, it is characterized by passionate indifference – a paradoxical mode of attachment premised upon the ethical imperative of interpersonal distance. In philosophical terms, this distance is justified by a neo-Arendtian defence of the classical distinction between the public and private realms, whilst affectively it tends towards a certain toughness or coldness which is distinct from the ethical dispositions of compassion, charity or romantic love. Secondly, impersonality consists of an operation of depersonalisation: the process through which the prevailing mechanisms of personal identification (from name, voice and face to the broader categories of race and gender) are deconstructed or negated so as to give way, in an ideal scenario, to what Deleuze calls "an impersonal yet singular life" (2001, 28). In other words, impersonality is an emancipatory operation through which individuated persons become eventalised singularities. Thirdly, as a poetics, impersonality can be instantiated via such features as affectless prose, the deconstruction of realist regimes of character representation, or critical metafictional reflections on authorship (the author being a crucial node of the *dispositif* of the person). Finally, impersonality is characterised by an ontological indeterminacy: it names a locus or operation that simultaneously posits and subtracts something (statements, existents) or renders

indeterminate socially prevailing binaries. In the case of the present novel, for example, "double negative" names a structurally indeterminate zone between yes and no.

These general features of impersonality become accentuated and frustrated under historical conditions of postcolonialism. This is the case for *Double Negative*, which is structured around two dilemmas: the dilemma of postcolonial publicity and that of postcolonial mourning under conditions of rampant neoliberalism. By rejecting the liberal-cosmopolitan conception of literature as an expansive humanising force that nurtures interpersonal recognition, the ethos of impersonality risks reproducing the structural racism of the public sphere, since the latter is premised upon a self-abstraction from bodily immediacy which renders certain (white, male, middle-class) bodies invisible and others marked. Marked bodies are unable to attain to the disincorporation of reason which is a pre-requisite for full participation in the public sphere. In what follows I trace the novel's partial solution to this problem through its rendering visible the white writer's body and its investment in the indeterminate structure of the double negative. The second dilemma concerns the manner in which the specific histories of South Africa and Johannesburg demand a radical political attachment to illegible material remnants (figured in the novel as depersonalised "disjecta membra" or "dead letters") as a form of symbolic resistance to the free circulation of neoliberal capital. This attachment allows Vladislavić to gesture towards the existence of an *anti*-world literature consisting of illegible fragments that refuse cosmopolitan circulation; at the same time, however, this very attachment mimics the structure of the fetish, which, as various philosophers have shown (Agamben 1993, Comay 2005, Khatib 2016), is inherent to the melancholic disposition. Since melancholy is precisely that disposition which prevents mourning, the novel is torn between its political commitment to fragmentary resistance and its desire to engage in the work of historical grief: to "work through" the historical burden of apartheid towards a truly *post*-colonial dispensation. I conclude by tentatively suggesting that world literature itself might be conceived as a work of mourning, albeit one which is implicated in the very dynamics of mourning and melancholy to which it gives form.

White Writing: The Shame of Realism

Double Negative is one half of a joint 2010 project by the South African novelist Ivan Vladislavić and his compatriot, the photographer David Goldblatt. The novel is Vladislavić's fictional response to Goldblatt's retrospective collection of apartheid- and post-apartheid-era photographs of Johannesburg (entitled *TJ*). It is a *Künstler*-cum-*Bildungsroman* which traces the development of Neville Lister from white petit-bourgeois, anti-apartheid youth to present-day post-apartheid maturity. Divided into three periods (the early 1980s, the early 1990s, and 2009), his personal development intertwines with his initiation into the practice of photography and the trajectory of South Africa from apartheid state to multiracial democracy. To that extent, the novel conforms to the "soul-nation allegory" identified by Jed Esty (2012, 39) as being the hallmark of the classical *Bildungsroman*: "the classic or nineteenth-century bildungsroman [*sic*] in Europe aligned nationhood and adulthood in order to create a manageable narrative about modernization." Yet the process of postcolonial nation-building is uneven. The staccato stops-and-starts, the repressions of the past and its uncanny returns, contort and distend the chronology of the novel. The narrative rhythm of *Double Negative* is structured by the grand narrative of History syncopated by ekphrastic stases of the photographic frozen moment, or what Fredric Jameson (2013) would call the "antinomies of realism": *récit* and affect.

Neville begins the novel having dropped out of university in search of "bitter lessons" (*DN*, 12). In a provocative parody of the hyper-naturalist strain of South African critical realism, he associates reality with dirt: "I wanted to be in the real world … I wanted to get my hands dirty" (*DN*, 9, 10). His naivety consists in mistaking an extreme empiricism – the world must mark his body for him truly to know it – for objective social reality. It raises a set of interconnected questions that become central to the novel: What is the distance or scale at which the hidden workings of a given society become discernible? What is the mode of social relation appropriate to this distance? What is the best means of representing it? Neville's passion for the real courts two dangers: it risks a fetishisation of empirical immediacy (a recurring theme) and it potentially blinds him to the fact that empirical reality, no matter how "gritty," is always mediated by larger and more abstract social forces. Part

of Neville's self-formation, then, will be the "bitter lesson" that impersonal *distance* from immediate reality and the body is sometimes a precondition of knowing them more intimately.

This metafictional critique of realism's corporeality is extended through the figure of the journalist Gerald Brookes. He is introduced as "a red stump of a man with a bald head" (*DN*, 38), a phrase that sets the tone for the constant references to his physical ungainliness that recur throughout the first part of the novel. Brookes is an arch-realist in whom the noble moral outrage of the *engagé* writer against the injustices of apartheid meets a commitment to naturalist grittiness reminiscent of *Les Rougon-Macquart* of Émile Zola. Together with Neville and Saul Auerbach, calculated namesake of the great philologist Erich Auerbach, and a well-known photographer who becomes an "example" for Neville ("we did not say 'role model' then") (*DN*, 30), he sets out "on an adventure. On safari, with Auerbach to cut the spoor" (*DN*, 47). This colonial trope sets the stage for a journey into Bez Valley in search of "action" and photographs. In framing the hunt for action in this way, Vladislavić provocatively suggests an intimate rapport between the narrative and mimetic desires of realism and colonial predation. Indeed, it will prove one of the mitigating factors of Auerbach's photography that his method, unlike Brookes' ravenous hunger for the real, is premised upon a certain passivity, what Stefan Helgesson has described as "a subtler, relational expressivism of call and response, of the seen awakening something within Auerbach, the photographer, and thereby making the previously invisible visible" (2015, 56). Nonetheless, when confronted with Veronica, a black woman living in the servants' quarters behind a student house upon which the three men intrude, Neville is only too aware of the racial dynamics of the situation: "it hardly mattered whether she grasped what we were up to. Who we *were* was clear. We were white men. We would do as we pleased" (*DN*, 50-51).

Neville's shame at their very presence becomes connected to the excessive materiality of Brookes' body. Where Veronica is described as "a slight woman with an elfin face" (50) whose bones are visible beneath her skin, Brookes is "overheated … pink and damp" (41); his head "looked like an egg extruded from the glistening shell of his jacket" (53-54). His bodiliness is constantly connected to the act of writing as a violent intrusion: "concealed behind the washing as if he were a prompt in the

wings, scribbling in his notebook" (51), "pausing between lines with his hand going up and down like a sewing-machine needle" (55). The climax of Neville's shame comes when Brookes, without permission, crosses the threshold of Veronica's home, invading what should be a private space:

> As soon as he [Auerbach] was gone, Brookes stooped under the washing line, thrashing through the sheets like a pantomime ghost, and peered around the door. "May I come in?" His voice was a spill of white enamel on red brick. He ducked his head and went inside.
>
> I hung back, flustered by my own discomfort, repelled by Brookes and the haze of deodorized sweat and proper English that had begun to emanate from him. (51-52)

The aim of this scene is clearly to make visible the white man's body and foreground the racialised materiality of writing. Brookes is fat, clumsy, sweaty, and even his voice is "a spill of *white* enamel." Neither he nor his thrashing body respect the limits of decorum: like a hunter on safari, he stalks over the threshold in search of narrative prey. It is no coincidence that when Neville later becomes recognised as a photographic artist in his own right, it is initially as part of an exhibition entitled *Public][Private*. Indeed, a neo-Arendtian defence of the public-private divide is integral to Vladislavić's ethico-political project of impersonality, rejecting the prying gaze of realism and the white destruction of black privacy under apartheid (cf. Poyner 2011), as well as the subtly disturbing post-apartheid conflation of what Arendt (1958, 22-78) calls the social and the intimate – as represented by Janie, the novel's prototypical neoliberal subject.

Vladislavić's aim here is directly comparable to that of J. M. Coetzee's recent works, described by Timothy Bewes as "to render visible, 'marked,' the white bourgeois body, reversing the process of self-abstraction and disincorporation that [Michael] Warner imagines as the construction of the public sphere" (2011, 161). In his essay "The Mass Public and the Mass Subject" (1991), Warner argues that the public sphere is a utopian construction premised upon the disincorporation of universal reason. This logic of abstraction has acted as a logic of exclusion, rendering certain (white, male, middle-class) bodies invisible and others as "marked;" the positivity of the mark acts as a material residue that prevents such bodies from

attaining to the disincorporation of universal reason. Yet if one combines this observation with the novel's constant emphasis on storytelling's implication in racialised violence, it becomes clear that Vladislavić faces an impossible dilemma. In rejecting the liberal-cosmopolitan doxa of compassionate, interpersonal recognition through storytelling (predominant in the era of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission), how does one go about constructing an ethico-political *im*personality that avoids the structural racism of the self-abstracting public sphere? In other words, having revealed the gluttonous, white-writing-body of Gerald Brookes behind the semblance of self-abstraction – "[he] peeled his prawns and licked his fingers, and scratched in his notebook" (*DN*, 56) – what is the impersonal social form or mode of representation that could extricate itself from such shamefulness? To trace the novel's tentative answer to this question requires a closer examination of the strange materiality of writing.

Dead Letters

At the heart of the second part of the novel lies the ambiguous figure of Dr Pinheiro. On the day of their fateful "safari" into Bez Valley, Auerbach, Brookes and Neville had selected three houses by chance from a distance: Veronica's, Mrs Ditton's and a third house – Neville's choice – which they ultimately never visited. The mystery house lingers in Neville's memory. Having become a commercial photographer whilst living in London, Neville returns to Johannesburg to become part of the new South Africa, mainly by participating, through his photography, in the neoliberal commodification of the rainbow nation. Unable to resist returning to Bez Valley, he turns up unannounced at the house and concocts a story about a fictional ex-occupant, "Rosco Dunn," whom he claims to be researching. The present inhabitant, Mrs Pinheiro, an elderly lady, invites him in but implies that her husband, Dr Pinheiro, is asleep in a bedroom that becomes increasingly shrouded in magic and mystery. This magic – overtly compared to Latin American magical realism –[3] becomes associated with Neville's newfound power of fabulation.

[3] Vladislavić has expanded on his parody of magical realism in an interview: "Perhaps it's an extended play on words. The second part of the novel is set in the magical early years of democracy in South Africa. … The

Dr Pinheiro, whom we later learn has already died, arrived in South Africa as a refugee fleeing the Mozambican "Revolution" (*DN*, 114). Neville imagines him on his death bed: "On the wall, a motto in needlepoint, *Aluta continua!*" (131) – the rallying cry of the Mozambican Liberation Front. Dr Pinheiro is thus a figure of radical anti-colonial political struggle. Since he was unable to speak Afrikaans, however, he was prevented from practising as a doctor in South Africa, having instead to work at a post office sorting letters. Fearful of losing his job should he be unable to decipher the script on illegible envelopes, he began bringing home the "dead letters" (127). "Together we went through the letters," explains Mrs Pinheiro, "and I helped him decipher the addresses. That's how we fell in love" (116). Not all such letters could be deciphered: "they were sent by people who could barely write or afford the cost of the stamp. Half a person, half a place, bits of farms and villages … Names you'll never find in a directory" (128). The dead letters are thus material remnants of apartheid subalternity; they become part of an operation of depersonalisation through which metonymic body parts and half-names come to stand in, fetishistically, for "missing persons" (the title of Vladislavić's first short story collection). Traces of the subaltern body mark the paper: "creased and soiled as if they'd been carried in a bra or sweaty pocket" (128). Yet, whereas the materiality of the letter in the first part of the novel was imbricated in the racialised corporeality of white writing, here it becomes integral to a poetics of impersonality that is offered as a tentative alternative.

One of the recurring motifs of the novel is a quotation from the German writer Günter Eich: *Seid Sand, nicht das Öl im Getriebe der Welt* [Be sand, not oil, in the workings of the world] (*DN*, 18). The irony is that Eich became a Nazi collaborator, producing literary propaganda for the Third Reich, and the character who quotes him, Neville's some-time lover Sabine, transitions from apartheid sand to post-apartheid oil, as she literally capitalises on the new South Africa through private investment in the education sector. Pinheiro's dead letters, however, live up to Eich's

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Truth and Reconciliation Commission had a darker vein of magic running through it. For all its failings, which became clearer as time went by, the Commission created a space in which people were brought to life or laid to rest in the rituals of storytelling.… The magical flourishes are also a joke about my own style. When I published my first novel in 1993, I was called a magical realist. You may recall that Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* appeared in 1991. For the next few years, publishers and scholars were looking for homegrown [*sic*] African magical realism in every flight of fancy. (Trundle 2013)

maxim in a way that neither Eich himself nor Sabine ever would. For to be sand in the machine is to stop the machine from functioning; in systemic terms, it means preventing the system's *circulation* and, by extension, self-reproduction. Post is that which circulates by sublating the materiality of the letter into meaning or address (literally and metaphorically); to prevent this circulation is to make the materiality of the letter unsublatable – that is to say, unreadable.[4] The relevance of what Neville will tellingly call this "world of letters" (131) to that other world of letters – world literature – is then self-evident. Where David Damrosch defines world literature in true cosmopolitan spirit as a "mode of circulation and of reading" (2003, 5) encompassing "all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin" (2003, 4), Vladislavić constructs an *anti*-world literature in which illegible body-letters fail to circulate and are held "in trust" (127) by a refugee – who is himself a figure of stalled movement. "Dead letters" thus combine two interconnected features: as material traces, they commemorate the bodily suffering and resistance of the vanquished of apartheid, and as illegible materiality, they are symbolic fragments of resistance – grains of sand – in the machine of post-apartheid South Africa. Beyond that, they are a resistance immanent to the concept of world literature itself: the illiterate and disenfranchised negativity that world literature's legible positivity has repressed.

The palimpsestic layering of Vladislavić's impersonal poetics, however, does not stop there. When Neville's mother asks him what ultimately happens to dead letters at the post office, he replies:

> "The incinerator."
>
> "Sounds terribly final."
>
> "That's what she [Mrs Pinheiro] said. That's why the hopeless cases, the ones they couldn't figure out between them, were never taken back."
>
> "He decided to save them! Pinheiro's ark!" (*DN*, 128)

The dead letters are figured as Jews and Dr Pinheiro as a Mozambican Oskar Schindler, the fictional hero of Thomas Keneally's 1982 novel, *Schindler's Ark*, better known from Steven Spielberg's 1993 film adaptation *Schindler's List*. In line with ideas first sketched out in the unfinished stories "Dr T" (1998) and "The Cold Storage

[4] On postal systems and nation-building, see Geoffrey Bennington (1990).

Club" (2005), published with (or as) essayistic reflections in *The Loss Library and Other Unfinished Stories* (2012), Vladislavić seems to be engaging in what might be called an "absent materialism" in which "dead letters" are the material substitutes, at once metonym and metaphor, for a corporeal absence: in this case, the victims of the Holocaust. Perhaps inspired by the empty bookshelves of Micha Ullman's "public sculpture," *Bibliothek*, on which he comments in "The Cold Storage Club," absent materialism becomes integral to the wider project of impersonality: contrary to the young Neville's desire for immediacy and Brookes' hunger for juicy personal details, dead letters stand for absent bodies, a materially mediated absence that rejects personal and bodily immediacy. Yet, despite his tendency to fetishise illegible fragments, these latter allow Vladislavić to engineer a productive, politicised poetics of remembrance: to mourn, for Vladislavić, is to "make something of their leavings" (2012, 95) (a "leaving" being at once a remnant and a page).

This generative mourning-as-resistance becomes even clearer in the final intertextual reference of the "Dead Letters" section. At the end of Herman Melville's well-known tale, "Bartleby, the Scrivener," the narrator informs us of a "little item of rumor" concerning his now deceased legal clerk: "The report was this: that Bartleby had been a subordinate clerk in the Dead Letters Office at Washington, from which he had been suddenly removed by a change in the administration" (Melville 1984,671-672). The narrator is so troubled by the rumour that he can barely express the emotions that "seize" him:

> Dead letters! does [*sic*] it not sound like dead men! Conceive a man by nature and misfortune prone to a pallid hopelessness, can any business seem more fitted to heighten it than that of continually handling these dead letters, and assorting them for the flames? For by the cart-load they are annually burned. (1984, 672)

Vladislavić casts Melville's ending in a new light: the dark flames of the Holocaust are suddenly prefigured in the mid-nineteenth-century Dead Letters Office. Moreover, Bartleby, like Pinheiro, is homeless and a figure of resistance:[5] his constant refrain, "I would prefer not to," has become a watchword of political refusal. Illegally

[5] Arne de Boever (2006), via the work of Giorgio Agamben, has even connected Bartleby to the plight of the refugee.

occupying his workplace and using it as a home, Bartleby confounds traditional distinctions between public and private; at the same time, his work desk is situated behind a specially installed screen that shields him from the gaze of others, creating a space that becomes known as his "hermitage." Bartleby, like Neville, thus upholds the limits of personal privacy whilst confounding the particular modality of privacy innate to private property. He writes "silently, palely, mechanically" (1984, 642) and his impersonal machine-like repetitions of the infamous catch-phrase drive his employer (the narrator) to distraction, leaving the latter feeling "unmanned" (650) (yet another link to the motif of fetishism and castration that runs through *Double Negative*). At the same time, Bartleby's curious plight leaves him experiencing an "overpowering stinging melancholy" (651); the narrator feels compassion for Bartleby, yet these bursts of sympathy turn just as quickly into sudden threats of violence. One suspects it is this barely concealed hatred, born of egotistical contempt for those who defy the narcissism of do-gooding sympathisers, which Vladislavić discerns behind the veneer of liberal-cosmopolitan compassion.

Ultimately, though, the true relevance of Bartleby to *Double Negative*, and to the ethico-political disposition of impersonality, lies precisely in the structural ambiguity of the phrase "I would prefer not to." Deleuze (1993) has called it an example of "agrammaticality," whilst Agamben likens it to the "indifference of Being and Nothing" (1999, 259). Derrida suggests that it "evokes the future without either predicting or promising; it utters nothing fixed, determinable, positive, or negative" (1995, 75). What these distinct philosophical positions gesture towards is a purely indifferent and impersonal mode of being, subtracted from all positive determinations, but which nonetheless holds open, in being, the material potentiality of a future-to-come.[6] The very meaning of "double negative" is the negation of a negation that never becomes positive. Double negatives are thus material inscriptions that prise open a "zone of indistinction between yes and no" (Agamben 1999, 255). They are also, consequently, a potential solution to the dilemma of postcolonial publicity outlined above: they enable the construction of an ethico-political impersonality that avoids the structural racism of the self-abstracting public sphere

[6] Roberto Esposito (2012) has attempted to develop an entire philosophy of impersonality along similar lines.

by "working through" the racialised materiality of writing or by subtracting the positivity of writing as such. Vladislavić's non-melancholic materialism mourns the absent subaltern body and the victims of the Holocaust whilst holding open a pure political potentiality. Yet it is intrinsic to the structural ambivalence of ontological impersonality that, whilst it clearly produces radical political effects, it can, by definition, never be clearly articulated as part of a positive political programme. It could perhaps best be understood as a place-holder: it holds the place of a future political project.

The Angel of History and the Fetish of the Image

That such an oblique emphasis on futurity should occur in a novel ostensibly about the photographic legacies of apartheid is worth pondering. One of the novel's recurring motifs is Walter Benjamin's "angel of history," traditionally associated with a melancholy brooding upon the disasters of the past. So how exactly is the past connected to the present and the future in *Double Negative* and what is the precise relation between the dead letters and Benjamin's angel? At the end of the second part of the novel, Neville comes across a pamphlet about the postal system. It explains that under apartheid township dwellers and inhabitants of rural areas had been denied access to mail services: "In the new dispensation, it was the aim of the Department of Posts and Telecommunications … to rectify this situation, and thus play a small but vital part in building new communities of citizens and a new nation" (*DN*, 133). The government aims to establish a fully circulating national postal system, with no remainder, that will enable full national inclusion and inculcate a sense of shared citizenship. Yet, in light of the preceding reflections on "dead letters," the successful incorporation and circulation of previously unrecognised addresses *metaphorically* implies an idealist construction of the nation that forecloses the materiality of writing – and hence, by extension, the traumas of the past. These traumas, if not worked through, will continue to haunt the bodies of the present, as witnessed by Janie's fear

of bodily contact in the mall (*DN*, 172).[7] A cavalier attitude to the traumas of the past thus goes hand in hand with a fear of corporeal community in the present.

The ambiguity of this relation to the past is inscribed in Vladislavić's subtle reversal of Benjamin's description of the angel. Benjamin's ninth thesis on the philosophy of history, inspired by Paul Klee's 1920 painting "Angelus Novus," states that the angel's "face is turned towards the past" [*Er hat das Antlitz der Vergangenheit zugewendet*] and that a storm from paradise "irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned" [*treibt ihn unaufhaltsam in die Zukunft, der er den Rücken kehrt*] (Benjamin 1970, 259-260). Yet when Neville invokes the image to describe Auerbach's photograph of Mrs Ditton, he says: "it was receding into the past, but with its face turned to the future" (*DN*, 67) – the direct inverse of Benjamin's angel. There are two possible explanations. The first is that by reversing the image Vladislavić is satirising the false optimism of the neoliberal "rainbow nation," which has chosen to look to the future at the expense of repressing its past. "I'm trying to understand," he has explained in an interview, "our movement away from that intense focus on history in the 1970s and the 1980s, to a point where many people resist the idea of looking back" (cited in Helgesson 2015, 54-5). Yet there is also a sense that, by reversing the now clichéd image, cited *ad nauseam* by scholars the world over, Vladislavić is performing an iconoclastic *détournement* designed to break with what Sami Khatib has called the "sentimental 'Benjaminia'" whose "identification of Benjamin with the angel's allegedly melancholic gaze … [neutralizes] the political thrust of his reflections on history" (2016, 25). Just as Vladislavić's absent materialism insisted on holding together Holocaust memory and anti-colonial resistance in a single project, so his lightly parodic angel of history remains *by habitual association* facing the past, but through creative misprision learns to face the future.

Rebecca Comay has shown that the melancholy traditionally associated with Benjamin is intimately connected to fetishism, since both in different ways seek to fend off trauma and "collude to produce the illusion of an intact present – solitary, sufficient, immune from past or future threat" (Comay 2005, 96). It is precisely this

[7] This is a clear example of what Roberto Esposito calls "immunity": "Whether the danger that lies in wait is a disease threatening the individual body, a violent intrusion into the body politic, or a deviant message entering the body electronic, what remains constant is the place where the threat is located, always on the border between the inside and the outside, between the self and other, the individual and the common" (2011, 2).

occlusion of the traumatic past that prevents any relation to a radically different future, since the negativity of repetition is a source of generative power. Reading Freud's cryptic remark that in the case of melancholia "a loss has indeed occurred, without it being known what has been lost," Giorgio Agamben has argued that "melancholia offers the paradox of an intention to mourn that precedes and anticipates the loss of the object" (1993, 20). Comay glosses this argument thus:

> Melancholia would thus be a way of staging a dispossession of that which was never one's own to lose in the first place – and thus, precisely by *occluding structural lack as determinate loss*, would exemplify the strictly perverse effort to assert a relation with the non-relational. (2005, 89; emphasis added)

Sami Khatib (2016) transposes this pre-emptive substitution of determinate loss for structural lack onto Benjamin's angel. He insists, after Lacan, that the angel's gaze (the unattainable object of desire, the primordial mythic state of paradise "before" humanity's fall into history) must be distinguished from what he sees (the pile of debris, fragmentation). This split in the angel's vision is *structural* since history, for Benjamin, is ontologically incomplete; the historicity of history is an effect of the tension between the devastating fragmentation the angel sees and the impossible wholeness he desires. To conflate the two is to lapse into a melancholic internalisation of a lost object that was never possessed in the first place. What is required is a work of mourning that comes to terms with structural lack, and which Khatib argues can only take the form of politics: "Political action is the only 'analytic,' that is non-pathological way of confronting the impossibility of undoing the split of the angel's vision and acknowledging the unattainability of his object of desire" (2016, 27). Yet, precisely because radical political action is a *Trauerarbeit* designed to "work through" the structural lack, it cannot, by definition, be equated with the angel's impossible desire; in other words, whatever else Benjaminian communism may be, it is not a return to Eden.

The question this raises for *Double Negative* is to what extent Vladislavić's impersonal poetics of absent materialism corresponds to the logic of Khatib's reformulated *Trauerarbeit*, or, alternatively, in how far it remains captive to melancholy fetishism. When Rebecca Comay describes the symptoms of the fetish, it is hard not to think of Neville Lister. She notes "the apparent literalism of fetishist desire, the

refusal of symbolic mediation, the irreplaceable 'thisness' or singularity of the fetish object" (2005, 94), which seems an apt description of the novel's loyal attachment to the illegible materiality of the dead letters. Likewise, she remarks upon the "fetishistic passion for the inanimate – to objects, to body-parts" (94) (later even using the exact phrase "disjecta membra"), which reminds one immediately of Neville's recurring obsession with hands, faces, feet, and bodily prostheses throughout the novel. Crucially, Giorgio Agamben has linked this logic of the fetish to the recurring poetics of the "nonfinished" in modern art and literature: "almost all modern poems after Mallarmé are fragments, in that they allude to something (the absolute poem) that can never be evoked in its integrity, but only rendered present through its negation" (1993, 32). Yet it is precisely through such fragments, notably the scraps and cut-outs of everyday trivia that his mother encloses in her letters to him, and which Neville spatially arranges on his noticeboard, that he is able to maintain a sense of personal wholeness: "This ragbag of fragments, collected over a decade, finally held me together. It became the jagged seam where the ill-fitting halves of my life touched" (*DN*, 87). The novel implies that this fetishistic attachment to the fragment is at once a precondition of personal integrity in situations of crisis and a potentially regressive defence mechanism that cathects the phantasmatic wholeness of the Mother projected by the fragments themselves ("Mother's little helper" (*DN*, 132)). Either way, the integrity of the person does not pre-exist its formation from the remnants of history.

Thus emerges the second major dilemma of the novel: Neville's attachment to the illegible fragment is, as we saw in the case of the dead letters, precisely a defence against political incorporation into a neoliberal present that has repressed its traumatic past; yet this very attachment to the fragment is a symptom of the fetish, which by definition prevents the working through of trauma. The paradox comes to a head in the novel's portrayal of Neville's photography, which evinces all the symptoms of a fetishistic temporality. Rebecca Comay has observed that the melancholic inhabits the present as if the worst has already happened, whereas

> [f]etishism displays the same temporal logic in reverse: loss is warded off as always already in the future. Thus Freud's emphasis on the ritualized suspense which defines the temporality of perversion: traumatic belatedness is

> perpetually siphoned off to the next moment; perpetual foreplay seeks to recapture, immobilize and thereby retroactively construct the moment before the traumatic encounter – to forestall disaster by deferring it to a chronically receding horizon. (2005, 95)

Like Lessing's fetishistic sculptor, who seeks to capture "the pregnant moment just before the full horror strikes" (Comay 2005, 95), Neville becomes known as "Mr Frosty" because his photos focus on "the moment when things teeter; when they hover and vibrate, just before they fall" (*DN*, 147). His impossible desire – the object of his gaze – is a reversal of what Agamben has called "*the principle of the irrevocability of the past*" (1999, 262). Not coincidentally, Agamben argues that it is just such a "contesting [of] the retroactive unrealizability of potentiality" (266) that unites Benjamin and Bartleby: where Benjaminian remembrance "restores possibility to the past, making what happened incomplete and completing what never was" (267), Bartleby "calls the past into question, re-calling it – not simply to redeem what was … but, more precisely, to consign it once again to potentiality" (267). It suggests a connection between the dead letters and Neville's photography: "undelivered letters are the cipher of joyous events that could have been, but never took place" (269). This perhaps also explains why both Auerbach and Neville associate the frozen moment with a sense of *déjà vu*. Crucially, however, this re-potentialisation of a lost past, which risks a fetishistic disavowal of the trauma, is connected by Vladislavić to *futurity*. As we have seen, Neville – like Vladislavić – always associates photography with the future (cf. Vladislavić 2010, 66, 67; 2012, 8, 109); his angel of history faces the future, suggesting that the purely indifferent and impersonal mode of being of the "double negative" offers a fragile bridge between depersonalising fetishistic disavowal and the work of mourning. In that, it is not unlike Benjamin's messianism: "the rescuing of a past futurity and the retroactive stimulation of a 'not yet' forever to come" (Comay 2005, 101).

Conclusion: World Literature as Work of Mourning

I have argued that, amongst other things, Vladislavić's *Double Negative* can be understood as a reckoning with two related dilemmas. Firstly, there is the problem

of postcolonial publicity: having rejected the liberal doxa of compassionate, interpersonal recognition through storytelling, the writer's task is henceforth to invent an ethico-political *im*personality that avoids the structural racism of the self-abstracting public sphere. Secondly, there is the manner in which the specific histories of South Africa and Johannesburg demand a radical attachment to illegible materiality as a way of counteracting the inequities of rampant neoliberal circulation and its selective repression of the traumas of apartheid – a demand potentially undermined by its structural similarity to fetishism. I have suggested that Vladislavić invents partial solutions to these dilemmas through his project of impersonality, but also that the radical potential of impersonality is limited under the specific historical conditions of postcolonialism. The structure of the double negative is one of simultaneous avowal and disavowal – the self-same structure of the fetish – which systematically subtracts, or renders strictly indeterminate, all positivity. Like Bartleby's "I would prefer not to," the double negative is a source of ambiguous resistance, opening up a retroactive and anticipatory potentiality. It is a place-holder for a radical political project yet to be invented.

The overall impression is thus of two antinomies whose becoming-indeterminate generates potentiality. The catch, however, is that, whilst potentiality is certainly an advance over a repression of the past, it offers little in the way of a dialectical progression towards the future, since this would presuppose the very determinate negations denied by the indeterminacy of the double negative. What I wish to argue in conclusion, however, is that world literature is itself a mode of such dialectical mediation, a working through of the antinomies towards a new dispensation. In other words, world literature is a form of *Trauerarbeit*: the work of mourning. Stefan Helgesson, who overlooks the fetishistic intent of Neville's photography, nonetheless recognises Vladislavić's implicit critique of the image: "[t]he visualized moment, rather than representing the excluded, could be seen as an agent of exclusion, making us aware that the invisible will always be infinitely larger than the visible" (2015, 55). Through its ekphrastic descriptions of non-existent photos and its narrativization of their material preconditions (patriarchal white supremacy), the novel form is capable of imitating the *phenomenal structure* of the frozen moment – associated with the broken temporality and fetishistic disavowal of

trauma – and of thawing it out, liberating the image back into the narrative rhythms of everyday life. When Auerbach takes Mrs Ditton's photograph, she initially experiences it as a release from the bodily and existential weight of the present: "You can see the relief on Mrs Ditton's face as she drops from the fulness [*sic*] of life into a smaller, diminished immortality" (*DN*, 66). But this release, like the fetishistic symptom, is also a form of capture: "She hovered in the chair, unblinking, afraid to move a muscle, as if stirring would smudge that other body in the camera" (*DN*, 67). Only when Auerbach begins conversing with her is she freed from the unbearable lightness of the image: "With questions that opened into the rest of her life, into her complications, she was charmed back into the well-lit room of the present" (*DN*, 67). The novel form mediates between the frozen moment and the zone of exclusion, between the site of fetishistic potentiality and the realm of everyday life – of racial segregation and the "complications" of existence.

World literature thus has the ability to work through the *symbolic forms* of historical traumas, yet this process is always complicated by the fact that "world literature" is itself the object of melancholic fixations. Be it Goethe's resort to *Weltliteratur* during the traumatising experience of Napoleonic occupation (cf. Pizer 2000), or Erich Auerbach's (1969) lament for a *Weltliteratur* under threat of extinction from postwar "standardisation," the very notion of "world literature" is implicated in the dynamics of mourning and melancholy to which contemporary "world literature" responds. Indeed, were one to extend this psychoanalytic approach to other theories of world literature (which I intend to do elsewhere), one might say that the virtue of Franco Moretti's approach is that he begins from the presupposition that it does not exist: "world literature is not an object, it's a problem" (2013, 46). He has thereby already mourned the lost object that was never his to possess. In the case of Vladislavić, however, *Double Negative* combines the illegible fragments of an *anti*-world literature – a world of *dead* letters – with a carefully orchestrated pattern of intertextual references to a world literary canon of mournful – and ironic – resistance: Bartleby, the Latin American boom, and the complicitous Günter Eich. It is a world literature whose fragments are proactively constellated in the impersonal modality of the double negative: it circulates in stubborn remembrance of that which resists and in anticipation of what is to come.

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